DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 527 CS 008 312

AUTHOR Berger, Allen
TITLE Disguising the Issues in Education.
PUB DATE Oct 85
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (29th, Pittsburgh, PA, October 24-26, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bilingual Education; Educational Policy; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Government Role; Learning Disabilities; *Literacy; Phonics; *Politics of Education; Reading Instruction; Textbooks; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues; Thinking Skills

ABSTRACT

None of the current issues in education have much to do with education; they are politically, socially, or economically based, and opinions tend to be presented as facts. For example illiteracy statistics are inflated. Virtually all children have the opportunity to learn to read and write at school, and the majority of them do. Neither is the adult literacy problem an epidemic. Bilingualism in the schools has also become politicized, and those making pronouncements on bilingual education are not necessarily experts in the field. Students with so-called learning disabilities and dyslexia can be helped more by instruction than by the mislabeling that brings more funds into the schools. Rudolf Flesch has kept the phonics issue alive, but teaching phonics to children who already know how to read is like teaching the basics of driving to people who know how to drive. Because of the increase in working mothers, there is a trend toward earlier formal education with a focus on reading, although the benefits of such instruction are not proven. Schools spend money on word processors for composition instruction to improve thinking skills, when it is clear thinking that leads to clear writing. Finally, textbook publishers rush to respond to the politics of the states with the largest textbook contracts. Nevertheless, what many in education have been saying for years is now being said by persons in power. If educational issues are put into a proper, realistic perspective, they can be solved. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Allen Berger

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED265527

CS008312

Disguising the Issues in Education

Allen Berger

None of the current issues in education has much to do with education. Education serves only as a backdrop and a disguise. The issues are politically, socially, or economically-based, and opinions tend to be presented as facts. Look at the record.

In September, CBS News alerted us to the fact--or was it opinion?--that there are 25 million dyslexics in America. Author Jonathan Kozol claims that there are 60 million adult illiterates in America. Other so-called experts claim that millions cannot read because they have learning disabilities. Still others cite millions who don't read English because they can't speak English.

As far as I can figure out, if there are not too many cross-overs, it looks as if there are only three people left in America who can read English. To these three people, I am pleased to communicate some current issues, and I will try not to let the so-called "facts" get in the way of my opinions.

Adult Literacy. One of the real facts that gets lost in the numbers game is that most children who learn to read pay attention in school and come from homes where there are books. The job market demands that people be able to read and write, and it's good for people who did not learn to read as children to have a second chance. But we should not overlook the fact that virtually all children have the opportunity--some more, some less--to learn to read and write when they go to school, and the vast majority of them do. At any rate, when discussing adult literacy, there is no real value in misusing words--comparing illiteracy to an epidemic as is done in nationwide advertisements by some organizations purporting to promote literacy. There may be a problem but it certainly is not an epidemic.

Bilingualism. U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett says that the federal government should stop insisting that schools use only one way to teach children who speak a native language other than English if they want federal funds. The chancellor of New York City Public Schools, Nathan Quinones, says that he doesn't think that Secretary Bennett is an expert on bilingual education. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, however, supports Bennett's views which are attacked in an article in Education Week and supported the next day by an essay in The New York Times, which devotes about a fourth of its Fall Survey of Education to this controversy. One article in the survey is blatantly (and honestly) titled "The Politics of Bilingualism."

Learning Disabilities and Dyslexia. No less an authority than Bryant Gumbel informs the nation on NBC Today that learning disabilities are "a relatively new phenomenon." In an interview with Dr. Joan Shapiro, identified as a special-education expert, Gumbel and the rest of America learn that learning disabled people need help with their organizational, sequential, and perceptual skills. I had a grammar school teacher who said that everyone needed that kind of help.

Within days CBS aired Love, Mary, about "a dyslexic teenage girl who overcomes her reading disability and becomes a doctor." What the movie showed was that people who cannot read can be helped more by being taught than by being mislabeled. Unfortunately, the October 1985 issue of NEA Today contains a two-page spread about dyslexia, which is referred to as a "mysterious malady" which, according to Webster's Ninth, is "a disease or disorder of the animal body" or "an unwholesome condition." Obviously, a little truth-in-labeling would go a long way in efforts to identify and help learning disabled and dyslexic students.

Phonics. Rudolf Flesch helps keep this issue alive. Twenty-five years after he wrote Why Johnny Can't Read his sequel, Why Johnny Still Can't Read, appears. The amusing thing is that Flesch says what most reading experts say: phonics helps beginning readers and more should be taught in schools. The disagreement lies in the amount and with his sarcasm. Teaching phonics to children who know how to read is like teaching the basics of driving to people who know how to drive. Flesch reminds us not to label children or blame them for their reading problems, which is what happens when children are called dyslexic and learning disabled--often because the more children that are so labeled, the more money that comes to schools. Another issue being disguised as educational.

Early Reading. With the majority of women now in the job market, there is a need for something to be done with the children; hence earlier formal education with a focus on reading--notwithstanding that the evidence on what formal reading instruction does to little children is, to be kind, equivocal. Normally intelligent adults are willing to part with hundreds and even thousands of dollars to provide an unproven, magical, head start to Harvard. Their magnanimity is supported by only a thread of persuasive research as to the long-range, lasting effect or value of forcing babies to try to learn to read, as is pointed out in the December 3, 1985 issue of Family Circle. A social or economic issue, depending on how you look at it.

Writing and Thinking. Without any research to back him up, Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, writes in his national report that "clear writing leads to clear thinking." (Boyer does not say what he means by "clear writing" or "clear thinking.") In a letter from him in reply to my query about the research to back up his statement, Boyer replied that the statement is his opinion based on his observations.

Well, it's my observation that it's the other way around: clear thinking leads to clear writing and, if anything, writing tests thinking. At any rate, schools can purchase a million more word processers in a misguided attempt to improve thinking skills, but they do so on skimpy educational research as to the lasting improvements in reading, writing, or thinking skills this would accomplish. No matter what the ads say, improved typing skills don't necessarily lead to better thinking or writing although word processers do help students make revisions more readily.

Textbooks. Smartening Up Textbooks was the title of a segment on the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour on PBS in October. The focus was the State of California's decision to reject all the new textbooks for use in junior high classrooms on the grounds that scant attention was given to human reproduction, evolution, or scientific ethics. Because California has 11 per cent of the market, the companies are hard at work revising their books before the February deadline. At the same time groups are preparing lawsuits to keep the topics out. What any of this has to do with education is beyond me. Meanwhile, Texas has announced that it will look more closely at its schoolbooks, and California will focus its attention on math books in 1986 and reading books in 1987.

To cloud the issue, the National Assessment of Educational Progress announced in September that the majority of high school graduates are unable to comprehend complex material in textbooks. "The inability of a majority of high school students to understand, summarize, and explain complex material indicates that they will have difficulty coping with the demands of higher education and the world of work," according to the study concocted by the Educational Testing Service and paid for by the National Institute of Education.

Yet, all in all, this is the best of times. What many of us in education have been saying, to no avail, for years is now being said by people in power. If we put educational issues into a proper, realistic perspective, then we may be able to solve them. Is this likely to happen? Indeed--but only when an increasing number of teachers and administrators exert their rightful roles as experts in their classrooms and schools, when they work in a leadership role with

educational researchers (now calling themselves research scientists) who are largely outsiders, and when everyone interested in education has a greater respect for language and does not abuse words.

Allen Berger is Professor of Education, University of Pittsburgh, and the author of approximately three hundred publications. He is Editor of English Education, a quarterly published by the National Council of Teachers of English.